Oil and Sea Turtles: Biology, Planning, and Response

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Olive Ridley turtle (Photo by Janos Csernoch)

Few animals in the world's oceans evoke the kind of wonder inspired by sea turtles. Six of the seven living species of sea turtles are found in U.S. continental and territorial waters: the loggerhead, green, leatherback, hawksbill, and Kemp's ridley turtles, and olive ridley. All are listed as endangered or threatened under the U.S. Endangered Species Act; and all are on the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) Appendix I list, which prohibits their traffic in international trade.

Despite their longevity as inhabitants of the world's oceans, sea turtles are currently at risk from global environmental problems, including oil spills. While the probability of any given spill affecting sea turtles is low, even one spill—if it occurred at just the wrong time and place—could be catastrophic to one of these endangered species. Sea turtles are likely to be at greatest risk from oil spills, for example, when they are aggregating in a particular area to nest, right after hatching, and when foraging in ocean convergence zones.

Published by NOAA's Office of Response and Restoration, this book is the third in a series of publications that address oil impacts to warm-water resources. It presents a basic overview of sea turtle biology, summarizes what scientists know about the effects of oil on sea turtles, reviews potential response actions to protect turtles in the event of an oil spill, and presents case histories from previous spills and their impact on sea turtles. Also included are case studies of oil spills that have impacted sea turtles and their habitat.The book also contains excerpts from guidelines developed by the state of Florida for dealing with sea turtles on state beaches, including how to identify and mark nesting sites.

This book will be of interest to anyone interested in the continued survival and well-being of these intriguing ocean inhabitants—from oil spill responders and planners to resource managers, sea turtle rehabilitators, and veterinarians.

NOAA 's Office of Response and Restoration (OR&R) Hazardous Materials Response Division (HAZMAT) facilitates spill prevention, preparedness, response, and restoration at national and local levels and provides expertise on oil and hazardous materials response methods and technologies. HAZMAT 's scientists and spill scene coordinators provide expertise during spill events, training, and contingency planning.

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Oil and Sea Turtles: Biology, Planning, & Response is a free publication.

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